

The Most Dangerous Foe

By Angela Phillips; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

"Deen, tell me a story!"

"All right, Mavis, what kind do you want?" Deen Voorson settled his back against the bulkhead. The star cruiser *Republic's Return* had been assigned to evacuate command and technical personnel from Yavin Base. Deen had offered to settle the crew members' children in their quarters while they were on bridge duty.

"Tell me a story about a dragon," said Mavis, nestling into Deen's lap.

"Oh, no," said Mavis' brother Tarn, hanging out of his bunk into the aisle. "Not another dragon story. Too scary -- they keep her up at night."

"Not all dragon stories are scary," countered Deen. "And not all dragons are scary."

"They look scary," put in another child.

"But things aren't always what they seem," Deen said. "Let me tell you a story my grandmother used to tell me, that happened far, far away and long ago ..."

"How long ago?" asked Tarn.

"A million, zillion years?" asked Mavis.

Deen laughed. "Not that long, Mavis. More like a few thousand years. Back in the high times of the Old Republic, when the Jedi Knights were the defenders of peace and justice..."

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"Mistress Tannis -- it's finished."

"Let me see."

Sixteen-year-old Vici Ramunee assumed the salute stance and thumbed the activation switch on her lightsaber. A shaft of light leapt up between her hands. Mistress Tannis smiled in approval, her indigo eyes sparkling.

"Very good, Vici," said the Omwati. "Your lightsaber is an extension of your mind and a bridge between you and the Force. Use it carefully, as you would any of your other skills, and never draw it in anger."

Vici bowed and, quenching its flame, returned the lightsaber's haft to her belt. "Mistress," she said, "am -- am I a Jedi now?"

The blue-skinned Jedi teacher laughed, a tinkling silver sound. "Always the eager one, aren't you Vici. Patience. One would think the three years you've spent here at the Praxeum have been a lifetime -- but the time for you to return to your homeworld is sooner than you think. Tomorrow you will face one final test, and once you have completed it -- then you will be a Jedi."

Vici's brow wrinkled. "What sort of test, Mistress? And what if I fail?"

Mistress Tannis shook her head, her feathery white hair rippling over her shoulders. "Do not think of failure."

Vici met her teacher at the Praxeum gate shortly before dawn. "You will have from sunrise today to sunrise tomorrow morning to complete your quest, Vici," Tannis said. "As the day breaks, you will head north, into the forest, where you will find the river that will guide you. By nightfall you will be at the foot of the mountains. Travel up the river valley until you reach the Cave of Truth, where Jedi have been tested for thousands of years."

Vici, shivering from cold and excitement, tried to remain still, remembering that a Jedi should not feel the chill and a Jedi stays calm.

"When you succeed in this quest," Tannis continued, "you will be a Jedi Knight. You will have faced your most dangerous foe and triumphed."

"What foe?" Vici asked, startled. Tannis had never told her she was going to have to fight anyone.

Tannis simply smiled and shook her head. "That is for you to learn, child. Now empty your pouch, Vici, the sun will be up in moments and you are to carry nothing with you on your journey."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. No food, water, or tools. All you will need you will find in the Force. And do not trust your physical senses -- they will deceive you."

"Must I leave my lightsaber?" Vici asked.

"With your other tools, yes," said Tannis. She watched Vici lay it aside. "You may keep your jewelry," she said as the girl started to remove it.

Thanks, Vici thought, I'll just whack my enemy in the head with my necklace! What's the point of building a lightsaber if you don't use it?

"Use the Force to protect you," said Tannis. Vici started, wondering if the Jedi Master could read her thoughts. "With the Force as your ally, you may overcome all things," Tannis said. "Now go."

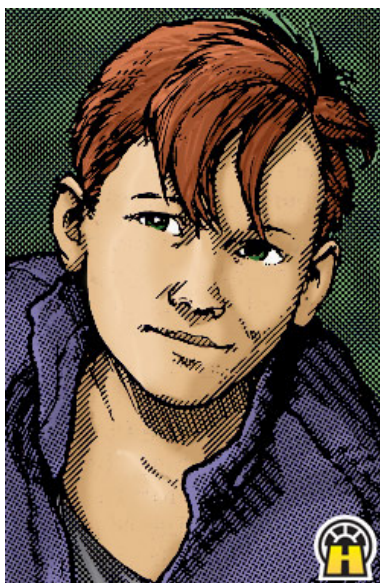
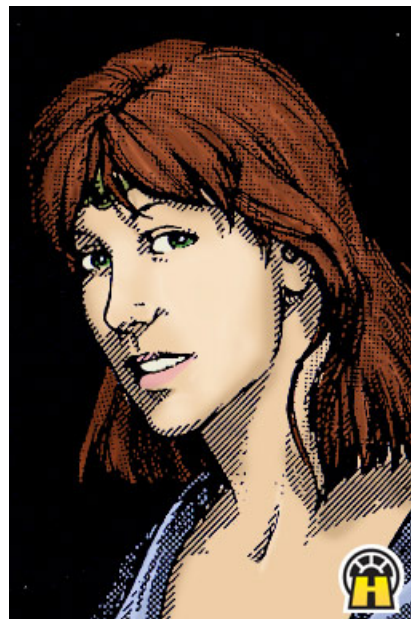
As the blue-white sun rippled over the horizon, Vici turned one last time to her teacher. "Mistress Tannis," she said, "what if I fail?"

"The Force is with you. Do not think of failure."

Vici found the river easily and followed it north through the woods. The day warmed quickly as the sun rose, and Vici found herself enjoying her walk. The straight gray trunks of trees rising to a ruffy blue-green canopy overhead reminded her of home; the crunching of leaves under her feet and the calling of birds in the treetops brought back memories of combing the uplands along Lir Lake, gathering t'iiil blossoms with her parents. Now the leaves were brighter, crisper, with every color and shape impressed into her senses, and the birds seemed somehow more alive -- she knew where each one sat without looking, knew the message of each song without pausing to think. The Force drew Vici together with the forest, as if there were no divisions between them, and she gloried in it.

By mid-day, however, Vici was hungry. She knelt to drink from the stream; the water was cold, clear, and fresh as any at home. Knowing that she had to keep on if she were to reach her destination in time, Vici planned to rest for only a few moments.

In stillness Vici suddenly became aware of the presence of a human searching through the forest. "Who's there?" she called aloud. The person was coming closer, and searching for her, she was certain. Vici wondered if this were her enemy come to challenge her already. She leapt to her feet, tensed and ready, reaching out through the Force. *He's looking for me, she thought, he's nervous, he's not coming to fight me, he's...*



"Veni!" she cried, spotting her 10-year-old brother scrambling along the river bank. "Veni Ramunee, what are you doing here?" "I didn't want you to be alone!" the boy said, splashing to her through the creek. "I was hiding just inside the gate this morning. I heard what Mistress Tannis said, about you having to meet a dangerous enemy. and I didn't want you to have to do it all by yourself. And I brought you this." He held out Vici's lightsaber. Vici rolled her eyes and sighed. Veni, who had only come to the Jedi Praxeum that year, was utterly devoted to his elder sister. Sometimes too devoted.

"Veni, the whole point of this test is that I do it alone! Now go back to your classes."

"But Vici," said the boy, "I wanna come with you. And ... and I don't know how to get back. I might get lost. I gotta stay with you." "You're j just saying that so I'll let you stay -- you won't get lost and you know it. You just follow the river, then you turn east when the woods get thin, and find your way back to the Praxeum by sensing the others' presence."

"I don't know how to do that yet!" protested Veni. "I have to come with you!"

Vici gave up. "All right, kid, you can come with me as far as the cave, but no farther! You'll have to wait outside when I go in."

Veni grinned. "Here," he said, "take your lightsaber."

"No," said Vici, "Mistress Tannis told me not to bring it."

"Well, what do I do with it?"

"You carry it -- don't try to use it," Vici added quickly, seeing the excitement in the boy's eyes, "just hang it on your belt. Now come on, we have a long way to go."

A few minutes later, Veni said, "Are you hungry, Vici? I made a sandwich. I, uh, took a few bites off it, but you can have ..."

"Finish it yourself," she said.

"All right."

"Are we nearly there?" Veni asked as the sun began to descend.

"We're getting closer," said Vici. "The trees are thinning out and the ground is rising. Mistress Tannis said the cave was at the end of a valley in the mountains."

"Can't we rest? I'm tired. Are we supposed to walk all day and all night?"

"You're not supposed to be here at all, kid. You wanted to come, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Veni sighed. "But can't we rest?"

"You can do whatever you like. I'm looking for the cave."

Veni sighed again but kept trudging along beside his sister. Vici felt sorry for the boy, but she reminded herself it was his own fault -- nobody had made him follow her.

"I'm hungry," Veni said.

"Tough. You ate the sandwich." *Also his fault*, Vici thought, though it didn't make her feel any less concerned for him. The boy's complaints were bringing her own discomfort to her attention as well. She too was tired and hungry, and caught in a state between eagerness to reach the goal of her journey and fear of what she might find. *A Jedi is centered*, she told herself, *a Jedi feels no extremes. Hunger and weariness are only of the body; a Jedi's strength flows from the Force*. It grew harder, though, for her to will away her exhaustion as the path grew steeper and the ground more rocky. Still she kept on, and her brother followed behind her.

By late afternoon, Vici and Veni had climbed well past the tree line. The valley seemed lifeless except for a few tufts of flowering vende and clusters of spiny planimals nestled against the eastern wall of the canyon to catch the last rays of the sun. By dawn they would have crept by moonlight to the west side of the valley, to absorb the light of dawn; Vici watched their tiny photoreceptors glittering in the sunset like jewels hidden in pin cushions.

"What's that?" she hissed abruptly, halting in mid-stride.

"What's what?" responded Veni, bumping into her.

"Listen."

Now they both heard it -- a faint pounding and thumping coming from far ahead of them, like pistons pumping in a distant machine.

"What is it?" Veni asked.

"Shh!" said Vici, closing her eyes and opening her mind. She recoiled at what she found.

"What's wrong'?" demanded Veni, sensing his sister's distress.

"It's alive," Vici said. "It's alive, and it's big, and it's coming toward us."

"How big?"

"Huge."

The thumping quickly grew louder; small pebbles began drop- ping off the canyon walls and dancing about the ground.

"We gotta get out of here!" said Veni, turning to run.

"No," said Vici, grabbing his shoulder. "Hear how fast it's coming? We'll never outrun it." She looked for somewhere to hide, but the rock faces offered no cover. Neither was climbing an option; she felt confident that with a little push from the Force she could scale the sheer walls, but her brother...

"What do we do? What do we do?" Veni's eyes were wide with terror as the increasing vibrations shook a slab free from the canyon behind them to crash into fragments on the ground. Even the planimals had begun edging away from the sound.

"I'll just have to fight it," said Vici, taking up a firm stance. "Veni, give me my lightsaber,"

"But Mistress Tannis ..."

"Told me not to bring it. She didn't tell you. Hand it over."

Veni complied. Vici activated the blade, its red light splashing around the valley and drawing a few planimals towards her. A plume of smoke from the end of the canyon heralded the approach of the creature. Coming around the bend into view, it was truly monstrous: over 10 meters of scaly, segmented body overshadowed by enormous leathery wings. Veni, hiding behind his sister, trembled at the sound of 20 powerful reptilian legs plunging toward him in deadly synchronization. Vici tried to master her fear, concentrating on the mighty power of the Force she knew she held tightly in her hands. The creature drew closer, and they could see a hideous, misshapen head, wrinkled and glittering, and dozens of needle-like teeth in a maw large enough to swallow Veni whole. It slowed to a stop as it approached them. Vici took full advantage of what she felt was the beast's momentary confusion and swung her lightsaber in a wide arc; the creature reared several pairs of legs off the ground to avoid the blow.

"Magnetic meteors!" the creature exclaimed, "what kind of a salute is that? What is Mistress Tannis teaching at the Praxeum these days, anyway?"

Vici froze in mid-slash, dumbfounded, as the creature threw seven sets of legs into reverse, backing away from the humans. "Wait," it said, "were you attacking me?" It snorted a puff of steam from its nostrils with a sound Vici assumed was a laugh. "The Sith Wars must be going badly, if Tannis is forced to graduate Jedi who can't tell friend from foe."

"You -- You're our friend?" asked Veni. Fear gave way to curiosity, and he moved out from behind his sister.

"You'd better hope so," it said with another snort. "I am Willm Lywin of the Duinuogwuin, guardian of this valley, and have been so for 600 years, give or take a decade. I have come to escort the initiate -- take it that would be you," it said, looking at Vici with a friendly twinkle in its eye, "to the Cave of Truth."

Vici hung her head in embarrassment, quickly stuffing her deactivated lightsaber haft into her pouch and wondering if Lywin could notice how red her face was. It probably can, she thought. "Master Willm," she said, "I am so sorry!"

"Oh, don't feel bad, child," the creature said with a ripple of its vast wings. "It's not as if this hasn't happened before -- remember I've been helping train Jedi for centuries. Let this be part of your lessons: never rush into conflict, no matter how threatening a situation may seem." It made an odd, clucking sound. "The hardest thing for human initiates is always 'don't be hasty.' Humans are such a fidgety species -- but very interesting," it added, with a glance toward Vici and her brother. "Now come along, let's go. The young lady has work to do before dawn, and the sun has set."



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"So you see," continued Vici, who had been talking to Lywin as they walked, "our parents weren't too happy to see us go, but they understood the responsibilities of being Force-sensitive and let us come here."

"Say, Master Willm," Veni put in from his perch on the creature's back, "where are you from?"

"I told you I've been here for six centuries," it said.

"You were born here?" Veni asked.

"Ah, no -- before I came here, I escorted a Praxeum ship for about four hundred years."

"And before that?"

"Oh, that was so long ago, it wouldn't interest you little humans. Your sister's stories are much more entertaining. Now tell me, Vici, how exactly did you help your parents in their work?"



Vici herself was sure that the life of a thousand-year-old Jedi Star Dragon must be much more interesting than an explanation of I'lahsh distillation, but she respected her escort's obvious wish for privacy and continued. "Well, I'lahsh is made from the nectar of the t'il blossom, and since each blossom contains only one tiny droplet of nectar, it takes hundreds of thousands of blossoms to produce the year's vintage. And because the blossoms are so delicate, they can't be harvested by machine or even by droid -- they have to be picked by hand, one flower at a time."

"And this is your task?" asked Lywin. He had produced a small datapad from beneath a scaly fold of his skin and was occasionally tapping information into it as he walked.

"We all join in the harvest, the whole family -- brothers, sisters, cousins, everyone. It's so beautiful in the springtime, the t'il grows over everything with little golden trumpets glowing, and the fragrance is all around you until you feel you could get drunk from just breathing. And the flocks of nerfs like white and black specks all over the meadows, and the thrantas with their gondolas winging overhead, and Lir Lake flowing into the sea, with the cetians leaping and singing in the spray. When Delaya is bright in the night sky, sometimes we hardly even sleep, we just keep bringing in the flowers, singing and laughing, all night long. With so many people to be paid, the money doesn't go too far, but I think it's worth it -- how could anyone be paid more than to be able to walk the uplands in springtime? Alderaan is the most beautiful place in the galaxy, and I can hardly wait to see it again."

"Papa and Mamma wouldn't mind getting more money," put in Veni. "Especially

since number nine boiler broke down."

"I know," said Vici, "but it's still beautiful." She sighed. "I do wish I could help Mum and Papa with money. They worry so much. All their messages to us keep saying how they need this or want that, and can't afford to buy it."

"Humans do seem overly preoccupied with money," said Lywin, tapping away at his datapad.

"Don't Dweena, um, Dono, uh, Star Dragons use money?" asked Veni.

"No."

"Then what do you use?"

"As a medium of exchange? We usually trade information. For example, I consider your sister's explanation of I'lahsh production a fair reward for escorting you -- I have often heard of I'lahsh, but had no idea what it was." It paused upon the path. "Ah, here we are, little ones -- the Cave of Truth."

"But that's a dead end!" Veni protested. The valley ended in a cleft piled high with rocks and boulders, over which the beginnings of the stream were trickling.

"Oh, little Jedi, I think your sister knows better than that," said Lywin with a friendly snort.

My physical senses will deceive me, Vici recalled and reached out to the Force. Sure enough, she found that the mound of stone concealed an opening into the cliff side. The largest of the boulders was too heavy for human arms to lift, but through the Force ... She began carefully levitating each stone away from the opening and setting them in a pile to one side.

"Can I help'?" asked Veni.

"No," said Lywin, "this is part of her test."

Soon Vici had cleared away enough small stones for the larger boulders, now unsupported, to roll away from the opening. The stream dropped down in a waterfall, silver beads in the moonlight, curtaining a dark tunnel. Vici shivered in excitement; here was where the real adventure began.

"Calm yourself, little Jedi," Lywin admonished gently. "Through peace we feel the Force."

Vici took several deep breaths, slowing her pulse and calming her mind. When she felt herself centered once more, she asked, "What am I to do now?"

"Enter the cave," said Lywin. "It is now five hours until dawn. You have that long to search out the cave and face its challenge. Your brother and I will wait for you here. Go, and may the Force be with you."

Vici bowed in salute to Master Willm and turned to enter the cave. Cold drops of water hit the back of her neck like icy needles; she shook them off and walked on into blackness.

The cave seemed to be a straight tunnel, dark except for moonlight filtering in from the opening, boring into the heart of the mountain. Vici began walking quickly. The path sloped down, and soon the light of the entrance was gone. Vici was walking in total blackness. After a time she quickened her pace, eager to meet the challenge of the cave. Suddenly she found herself fetched up against a solid wall. *A dead end?* she thought. *That's impossible!* But no matter how she probed, physically and mentally, she found no way forward. *Well what do I do?* She laughed. *Of course, she thought, how silly of me!* "Don't be hasty," Master Willm said. *I must've passed an opening in the wall on my way down.* She began retracing her steps slowly and carefully.

She found a doorway concealed in the rock-face on the right side of the tunnel; slight pressure slid it open. She moved down the new tunnel cautiously; she was not going to make the mistake of rushing past a door again. The next door led her right again, the next after that, left. Time passed, whether minutes or hours she could not tell. The darkness of the tunnels was complete. Vici could not have seen less if she were blind, yet her sense of the tunnel walls through the Force more than compensated. She did not lose her path again, and continued turning: left again, right, left again. She wondered how much farther she had to go, and how much time she had left, but she resisted the temptation to hurry, calmly opening one door after another.

Unexpectedly Vici came upon a well-lit chamber. After so long in blackness her eyes stung, and she covered her face with her hands, slowly adjusting to the light, Vici opened her eyes again and began to make out the contents of the room.

It was not as bright as it had originally seemed. The illumination came from a small fire burning in a hearth-niche to Vici's left. Between Vici and the hearth was a large chair, its back to her; across from the chair was a table. All the details of the room, from the way the walls curved into the low, domed ceiling and the colored glass screen before the hearth to the plantlike forms of the carved table legs, brought back memories of Vici's home, and she suddenly realized how badly she wanted to be there, and how truly tired she was.

And how truly hungry. The table was laid with a supper for one; across the room she could see a pile of little cakes, what seemed to be a quarter roast bhillen, cheese and fruit, and a pot of tea with steam curling gently from the spout. *Is this for me?* she wondered. *I'm so tired -- I could sit down, just for a minute, and*



have some food -- still, Vici, she told herself, you know if you sat down you'd fall asleep in two seconds and not wake up in time to finish the test. I can always come back. No telling who could happen if my enemy caught me napping. Besides, remember what Mistress Tannis said. This may not be what it seems... She thought she caught a glimpse of movement on the table and moved closer.

"Ugh!" she cried as a rat leapt from the cake plate to the floor. Her stomach churned as she saw that the cheese was a writhing mass of maggots; shiny black beetles scuttled out from beneath the bhillen, the fruits burst and collapsed in a puff of rot. "How revolting!" she said and turned away from the table ... Only to cry out in alarm at the occupant of the chair behind her: a skeleton, clad in moldering, tunic and breeches identical to her own. She clutched at her pendant in horror as the firelight winked off its twin at the breast of the corpse. *What can this mean?* She began to think, but no sooner had she begun to calm her jangling nerves when the apparition of death faded away into nothingness; Vici turned, and the table was empty as well, its loathsome contents vanished like a dream. Vici shook her head. "Cave of Truth?" she said. "More like the Cave of Lies! Still," she mused, "perhaps that's part of the test -- to find the truth behind the lies?" She began probing for a door. She found it behind a curtain.

It opened into chaos: a black, yawning void filled with rushing winds. *Surely I'm not supposed to just leap out into that!* she thought, drawing back and slamming the door. However, it was the only way forward. She checked the room again; she found no other openings, and the door she had come in by wouldn't open again. "Well," she said, "this must be it." She opened the chaos-door again; wind blew back her hair as she stood on the threshold. *This room looked safe*, but wasn't -- *well, sort of*, she thought, *so maybe?* She drew a deep breath. "May the Force be with me," she said and stepped out into the void.

The winds lifted her like a feather on a gentle spring breeze. Sooner than she would have liked, however, she found herself deposited upon a ledge. Two doors opened before her onto a pair of tunnels, one sloping up, the other down. *Which one do I take?* she wondered. She closed her eyes; *down*, she decided, *the down one feels right*. She started along it.

The passage began growing smaller. Soon Vici found herself stooping, then crawling on hands and knees as the tunnel shrank around her. Part of her mind began wondering if she'd taken the right tunnel. *No*, she thought, *it still feels like the right way, even though it's certainly not easy*.

Eventually she was forced to crawl along on her belly. *I hope that whomever I'm supposed to fight doesn't catch me like this*, she thought. *And I hope I don't run into any more rats and bugs, even illusionary ones*. She paused, peering forward in the gloom. She could see a faint light ahead, and she crawled toward it.

"At last," she sighed, wriggling from the tunnel into an open chamber. Drawing a few deep breaths, she looked around. This room was merely a rough cave; streaks of pale gold light crisscrossed about the walls in a glowing web. An archway opened on one side. Vici got up and, brushing dirt from her tunic, moved toward it, when a flash from the floor caught her eye. She looked more closely and saw, lying near the wall as if dropped and forgotten, a fist-sized crystal glowing with its own inner light: a corusca gem, the most highly prized jewel in the galaxy, formed in the core of a gas giant. *That's worth enough credits to let my parents hire half of Alderaan to pick t'ii blossoms and still have cash to spare -- and it's just lying in the dust, waiting for me to pick it up? I don't think so. This must be another test*, she thought, *to see if I can resist it*

"All right, Mistress Tannis," she said, "I'm getting the hang of this cave ... Ouch!" she said, trying to walk out the door. The threads of light crossing the opening had stung her flesh like hot wires, and even as she drew back they glowed fiercely. Vici moved a hand toward them again; their light intensified as they bent toward her. She backed away; they faded. She moved closer to a wall, and the light-strings there began to move and glow threateningly. *I've got to get past this web. I wonder -- do these strings respond just to me, or to any movement?*

She reached out to take the corusca gem, planning to throw it at the web. The strands closest to it sprang to life, moving to wrap themselves about the stone, throbbing fiercely. Vici's fingertips stuck to the stone; with effort she jerked her hand away, her fingers smarting. Reevaluating her plan, Vici nudged the gem through the power of the Force, and more glowing threads were wound to it. She looked over her shoulder at the doorway; the light threads covering it had been partially tugged aside. *It's like a myrmin being balled up in spider web, the way the strands stick to the jewel*, she thought. *I hate to think what could have happened to me if I had just grabbed it*. She continued to nudge with her mind, rolling the jewel carefully around the edge of the floor until all of the glowing net was wrapped about it and the passage out was clear.

The next chamber was lined with softly glowing mirrors that threw Vici's image back upon her in dozens of distorted reflections. She shut her eyes and sensed her way forward. *I must be near the end, she thought. My foe must be near*.

"Hello!" she called. "I'm Vici Ramunee -- is anyone going to challenge me?" Her voice echoed around the mirrored labyrinth but met no answer. She opened her eyes.

A flicker of a color different from her clothing caught her eye; she turned to see, as if through a window, the familiar grounds and buildings of the Praxeum. She reached out a hand, and the image faded away. She rounded the next corner of the maze, and thought she caught a glimpse of her parents. "Papa?" she called. *What does this mean?* She thought. *It's all illusion. She tried to follow the images through the maze as they flashed and faded across the mirrors -- friends, family, places she'd known -- but they seemed to lead her around in circles*. "This is getting silly," she said. "Am I supposed to fight someone, or not?" She closed her eyes again. *All right, this way*, she decided.

The next time she opened her eyes, she found herself in a mirrored cul-de-sac. *How can I have gone wrong?* she wondered as she turned around. A mirrored panel slid shut behind her; now she was enclosed in a mirror-lined box. "Oh, I see," she said, "new puzzle -- get out of this room." She began systematically probing the walls for an exit, but found nothing. Examining the floor found a puddle of water in one corner. Vici knelt down; water was seeping in through a hairline crack between the walls, but she still couldn't find a door.

Looking around, she saw water beginning to leak in at the other seams of the room. Her feet were quite wet.

"Well, this is nice," she said. "If I could use the Force to turn myself into a water molecule, I could squeeze out. Now where's the door? And where is my enemy?"

She continued unsuccessfully testing the walls, floor and ceiling of the room as the water kept rising. When it got to her knees, she stopped, as a cold thought hit her. "It's a trap," she said softly to her reflections. "My enemy's led me into a trap somehow."

She started pounding on the walls; her mirror reflections made it look as if a crowd of young women were fighting. "This isn't funny!" she said. "Is my most dangerous foe supposed to be water?" She threw her shoulder against a wall; she and her reflection met with a dull thud. "This isn't fair!" she cried. The water was coming in faster now, rising visibly. "This isn't fair!" she repeated. "Who are you! This is no way to fight, to drown someone! Show yourself! Come on out and face me!" Vici's eyes darted frantically about the chamber, but all she saw were frightened reflections and the rising water. "What kind of crazy test is this? So help me," she said, "if you don't let me out, whoever you are, I'm going to cut my way out! And then you'd better be ready to defend yourself, because I'm going to cut my way through you!"

She drew her lightsaber, preparing to strike the mirror using all of her strength, but the shocking sight of a young woman attacking with blazing weapon, hip-deep in murky water, face twisted in a furious grimace, froze her in mid-swing. *I look awful!* she thought, *like some kind of deranged Dark Jedi. No wonder Mistress Tannis said don't draw it in anger -- I could scare the pants off half the galaxy with that face...*

"Don't draw it in anger," she said, lowering the blade. "And I'm pretty angry now ..."

She deactivated the lightsaber. The reflection did likewise. She laughed at it. "You don't look so dangerous now," she said. "Maybe we should have gone on and attacked our enemy after all ... A dangerous-looking enemy?" she mused. The water was up to her chest. "Am I supposed to fight my reflection?" she asked herself. "Flow?" She reached out to the mirror; the mirror hand reached gently back. They touched; Vici's hand passed through the mirror as through the surface of the water. Not stopping to think, Vici pushed through the wall.



* * *

"Congratulations, Vici," said Mistress Tannis, sitting in the small room Vici had entered. "You have passed your test."

She blinked, confused. "But I haven't fought anything."

"Haven't you?" said Tannis. "Think back -- what have you faced in the cave?"

Vici thought. "Well, I missed a door -- I was impatient."

Tannis nodded. "Impatience can be a deadly enemy to a Jedi."

"And I was tired, and hungry, but everything in the room I found decayed and vanished -- like all matter," Vici added in realization. "So in that room I fought physical limits ..."



Tannis nodded.

"And the wind -- I fought fear, and the tight tunnel was doubt, and the corusca gem, that was greed. And the mirrors were, were..." She paused. "I kept trying to follow things that seemed important, but they led me nowhere. When I let the Force guide me, instead of trying to find the way myself, I moved on."

"And the last room?"

She thought. "Fear and impatience, again -- and anger. I fought myself. Am I my own worst enemy?"

Tannis smiled gently. "Nothing outside of us may separate us from the Force ..."

"Only our own emotions," said Vici as understanding filled her mind.

"And if we remain open to the Force," said Tannis.

"Then we are Jedi, and nothing can hurt us. We have nothing to fear," said Vici.

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"Good story," murmured Mavis sleepily as Deen ended his tale.

"Yes, I really liked it," said a young man's voice from the doorway. Deen started at the intrusion.

"Sir, how long have you been ..."

"No don't get up," the man said, laughter in his voice. "I just came to thank you for repairing my droid."

"Oh, yes, of course, Sir," Deen said, trying to seem properly awestricken while still covered with children. "The rest of the tech crew wanted to wipe his memory, but I figured with the things he'd seen..."

"He'd want to keep his memory," finished the pilot. "Thanks. And thanks for the story. I loved it. I wish I'd been able to hear stories like that when I was a kid."

Deen grinned and nodded. "We don't have anything to worry about now, Sir, now that you've joined us, do we?"

"Not if we remain open to the Force."